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[Mitchell Center a one-of-kind Facility Devoted to POWs](#)

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By Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Matthew Clutter, Navy Medicine Operational Training Center Public Affairs

Three men, all well into retirement, casually reminisce together one morning. From a distance, their talk would seem typical of men their age. Get closer, though, and you realize that their conversation is anything but typical.

They sit and laugh and toss stories back and forth of jet ejections and unconsciousness and torture and captivity. It has brought to a halt the doctors and clinical staff in the waiting area at the Robert E. Mitchell Center on board Naval Air Station Pensacola. The three men are essentially family. They were all prisoners during the Vietnam War.

The men are three of roughly 250 or so former POWs that visit the Robert E. Mitchell Center for POW

Studies each year for voluntary physicals that study the mental and physical effects of captivity. Researchers then apply the findings to today's warfighters.

The center has published a variety of studies on subjects related to the prisoner experience during Vietnam. Its work on the mental health issues related to captivity is notable in two studies.

The first, published in 2012, looked at the 662 military service personnel who survived captivity and were repatriated. Researchers found that it was not merely the type of trauma that occurred that explained how one fared afterward, but the type of person who experienced the trauma. Optimism, it seemed, was a stronger predictor of resilience than experience.

The second study, published in 2014, further studied resilience and found that optimism can predict positive health. In both studies, it was found that physical and uncontrollable factors, such as degree and severity of injury, hold less predictive power in determining physical health than a psychological and manipulative variable like optimism.

These studies are unique and believed to be the first of their kind to study solitary confinement and resilience. It's the type of work on mental health that has helped to define the research at the Mitchell Center.

The center is unique, too, the only one of its kind in the world. Some of the more regular patients randomly pop in even when they don't have appointments. Some come for the free coffee, some for the conversation, but usually it's both.

The man in charge of all this is Dr. Jeffrey Moore, Executive Director, clinical neuropsychologist and, let's be honest – after 26 years – friend, to all these former POWs.

"Friend may be rather strong word when used to describe a shrink and a military aviator," jokes Moore.

Founded in 1973 by Dr. Robert Mitchell, the center has its roots in the 30-year-long 1,000 Aviator Study, which concluded in 1970. Three years later, the Department of Defense granted a five-year charter for POW studies. When that five-year span ended, Dr. Mitchell continued the study on his own. The center has survived over the years largely because of support from Army, Navy, and Air Force medical departments, grants, and even received a \$1 million research appropriation from Congress in 1998.

Twenty-one Operation Desert Storm repatriates were added in 1991, and Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom repatriates were added in 2003. There are Admirals and Generals and several well-known folks who have been seen at the Center over the years including a former presidential candidate and a vice presidential candidate and Medal of Honor recipient.

The REMC itself is essentially a miniature museum of photos and books, many penned by the repatriates themselves. The center's most important feature, though, is its clientele. They are literal heroes. Their photos line the walls of the REMC and each has a story.

"Some stories are widely known. Some are kept strictly confidential," said Moore. "Some are poignant. Some are funny. All are heroic."

Sadly, the number of former POWs is decreasing by the year as they continue to pass away. Even its founding father, Dr. Mitchell, passed in 2015, bringing a host of former POWs to the base for the service.

Still, the REMC remains busy, and Dr. Mitchell's legacy lives on through his patients, and through their stories.